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## Op-Ed: Is Strategy Really A Lost Art?

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Have we really lost the art of strategy? One has to wonder. Critics have told us the American way of war is “astrategic.” Or that the “bridge” that links military actions to policy aims is failing. We have also heard that strategy has been consumed by operational art. Apparently, a black hole now exists where American strategy should be. Strategic incompetence is hardly unique to Americans; but it would seem we have few peers in this regard.

Fortunately, history suggests a different view. For one thing, the American way of war has never been truly astrategic. Over the years, American military practice has used at least half a dozen types of strategies: annihilation, attrition, exhaustion, decapitation, graduated pressure, and terror and intimidation. If frequency is any indicator, then decapitation—not attrition—has been our strategy of choice; and it has worked for us more often than not. Second, instead of consuming military strategy, American operational practice has facilitated it, enabling theater commanders to parse out missions and responsibilities over broad areas. By World War II, American military strategy was “tiered” or “nested” in practice. The overall strategy in that war was one of attrition, while subordinate commands followed a combination of Jominian strategies of position and Clausewitzian strategies oriented on battle. The downside of such tiering is that, without strong coordination at the top (or sometimes because of it), military strategy can become disjointed, with individuals or entire services attempting to pursue their own agendas or validate their own strategic theories. That has happened more than any American would like; but it makes the American way of war more political, not less strategic.

In 1957, President Eisenhower famously said that “Plans are worthless, but planning is everything.” If only it were true. Eisenhower, of course, meant that planning had to be continuous

because situations change, and the plan itself rarely survives contact with the enemy. However, by the middle of the 20th century, the importance of the war plan had grown in a sense altogether obscured by Eisenhower's well-traveled comment. For better or worse, the war plan—not strategy—did the real bridging between policy aims and the use of force to achieve those aims. The war plan identified the “devil in the details”—it analyzed the situation and established specific military objectives, as well as tasks and sub-tasks pursuant to accomplishing the lofty aims of policy. In a word, the war plan became the practical face of strategy. Without it, no military strategy could achieve anything. If we believe the old saw that amateurs debate tactics while professionals discuss logistics; then our strategic corollary must be that amateurs debate theories while professionals discuss plans.

Third, we could, without stretching our poetic license too much, revise Eisenhower's remarks, and claim that: “Strategies are worthless, but strategizing is everything.” A glance at American grand strategy through the Cold War—the last time we got it right, according to the critics—reveals just how many strategies of containment made up **the** “Strategy of Containment.” Those that worked did so for just a few years, until the conditions that gave rise to them changed. If we buy the rhetoric (not all of us do) that the current strategic environment is more uncertain and more volatile than any previous one, then the useful lifespan of our strategies is bound to be shorter. Indeed, we would be naïve to expect we could develop an enduring, one-size-fits-all grand strategy that would oblige successive administrations to follow. Our inability to accomplish that should be neither a black hole, nor grist for the critics.

Instead, we need to rediscover the value of strategizing relative to the outcome, the product, an individual strategy. The hard truth is that policy does not always need strategy to get what it wants. We have used military force plenty of times in our history without the guiding logic of strategy, and—though critics do not like to admit it—we have made it work often enough for it to be taken seriously. Sometimes what policy wants most is not to be tied to something inflexible, particularly something as inflexible as our strategic process. It is the proverbial machine that goes of itself, and it takes, or almost does, the preparation for and direction of war out of policy's hands. The question modern-day Clausewitzians really have to answer is whether war has its own logic after all, a logic provided by the dictates, the processes, and the dynamics of making strategy.

In all the online debates and blog sites concerning strategy, one theme is constant: we call strategy an art, but approach it as a science. We praise creative thinking, but assess our strategies with formulae: strategy = ends + ways + means (the **ends** we want to achieve + the **ways** or

concepts + the available **means**). This formula is as recognizable to modern strategists as Einstein's equation  $E=mc^2$  is to physicists. Each defines its respective field. Like all good math, good strategies consist of balanced equations. As our variables change, we merely rebalance our strategy: scale down the ends, increase the means, or introduce new ways. Like any good equation, our strategy remains valid so long as we keep one half equal to the other. This is a far cry from when military strategy meant the "art of the general" and, by extension, grand strategy meant the "art of the head of state."

If the art of strategy is truly lost, perhaps it is because—despite our rhetoric to the contrary—we really wanted it to be a science all along.

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